the dandelion

Vol. 6 April, 1997 No. 21

Ahrne Thorne

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Dedication

This issue of **the dandelion** commemorates the life of Ahrne Thorne, a long-time anarchist activist who contributed so much to the movement and to the lives of the people he knew. The following article was given as a speech by Paul Avrich at a memorial meeting for Ahrne Thorne at the Libertarian Book Club in New York City on March 27, 1986.

I asked Paul for permission to use this in a copy of **the dandelion,** which he freely gave. Other publishing pressures have forced postponement of this issue of the magazine. In the mean time I have decided to re-format **the dandelion** into a smaller page size. I will try to issue the magazine occasionally as time permits. I hope to fulfill all subscription commitments and will again take subscriptions if it appears that I can normally resume publication of the magazine.

Valerio Isca

A footnote: Since Ahrne's death I have lost another anarchist friend — a man who meant so much personally to me and to my family: Valerio Isca. Valerio was 95-years-old when he died June 13, 1996 at a hospice in Cabrini Hospital, New York City. He was a role model for us. I can't count the times we came away from meetings with him absolutely amazed with his keen mind, phenomenal memory and courageous heart. He put people half his age to shame with his enthusiasm for life. I miss you, my old friend.

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Sketch by Nick Coughlin

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Immigrant movement dies
with
Jewish anarchist editor

By
Paul Avrich

THIS year marks the hundreth anniversary of the Haymarket affair. It also marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Spanish Revolution, as well as the hundreth anniversary of the Jewish anarchist movement in the United States. And the Haymarket Affair and the Jewish anarchist movement were closely intertwined — one gave rise to the other.

It was the trial of the eight anarchists in Chicago, who were innocent of any crime and yet were condemned and four were hanged, that gave rise to the first Jewish anarchist group in this country. In the fall of 1886, after the Haymarket defendants were con-

victed, Jewish workers on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, at 56 Orchard Street, formed a club called the Pioneers of Freedom. Four years later, on Independence Day, they started a newspaper, the **Freie Arbeiter Stimme — Free Voice of Labor** — and it lasted for eighty-seven years, the last issue appearing in December of 1977. Ahrne Thorne was the last editor of the **Free Voice of Labor,** and his death in December of 1985, after a hundred years of Jewish anarchism, marks the death knell of the Jewish movement.

The Jewish anarchist movement with Ahrne's passing, no longer exists. So his death is a landmark in anarchist history. I do not mean to say that the anarchist movement as a whole does not exist, because the anarchist movement will always exist. As long as there are human beings, there will be anarchists. The poor you will always have with you, says the Bible. By the same token, the anarchists you will always have with you — as long as there is coercive government, as long as there is oppression, as long as there is exploitation, as long as there are decent human beings like

Ahrne Thorne.

I say that the anarchist movement will continue. But the Jewish anarchist movement is finished, because the Jewish anarchist movement was an immigrant movement, a movement which depended upon a certain culture, a certain language; and that, to a large extent, has faded awy. This is not to say that there are no more Jewish anarchists in the world — there are some. There are a handful in this country. There are also a few in other countries, most notably Israel and Argentina. But, adding a footnote to what I said about Ahrne, with his passing, not only is the movement finished in the United States, but it is for all practical purposes finished elsewhere as well, because, although he was based in New York and in the Bronx — in the Amalgamated Cooperative Houses, of which he was so proud because it was founded by anarchists and managed by an anarchist (Abe Bluestein, who spoke to you a moment ago) — he kept the Jewish anarchist movement going in other countries. There is still one Yiddish anarchist newspaper in the world. It is located in Tel

Aviv and is called — typically — **Problems (Problemen),** though I think that its days are now numbered. It has sufficient funds to go on for a while longer, but without Ahrne, the paper is a hollow shell. So it occurred to me, while listening to Abe Bluestein, Paul Berman, and Steve Parr, that this is the true significance of our meeting tonight: to mark not only the passing of Ahrne Thorne, whom I loved with all my heart, but also the end of a hundred years, the centennial of Jewish anarchism in the United States.

Having said that, I'd like to tell you about Ahrne's background, about his life. I am a historian and biographer of anarchists, and I'd like to give you a short biography of Ahrne Thorne.

I first met Ahrne twenty-two years ago, about ten years before Paul Berman met Ahrne. I was already teaching at Queens College — where I still teach, and I say they're going to plant me in the quadrangle when my time comes. I had been teaching there a few years and was already deeply interested in the history of anarchism and was embarked on my

first book, a history of Russian anarchism. There were quite a number of Jews, including one or two people in this room, who were active in the Russian anarchist movement. And Kropotkin's daughter, whom I had spoken to on the phone, and afterwards met, told me to go to the annual banquet of the **Free Voice of Labor,** which I did.

The year was 1963. I was wearing a suit a junior executive or state official, blundering into this gathering of Jewish anarchists. I felt nervous and ill-at-ease. I was there as a historian to record this occasion and to talk to the people and ask them about the Russian Revolution and the role of the anarchists in the Revolution.

There was a man seated at the front table, black eyebrows and curly dark hair, and with a naturally tanned complexion and a wonderful smile that lit up the entire room. As soon as I set eyes on this person — of course it was Ahrne Thorne — I immediately liked him. He came over to me, welcomed me. Suddenly I felt at home. All the nervousness, the shyness which I had in those days and which I have

shed long since — I think — vanished in an instant, and, from that moment, Ahrne and I became friends. Our friendship deepened over the next twenty-odd years, almost a quarter of a century, until he became the best friend that I have ever had, and the finest person that I have ever known.

Ahrne, interestingly enough, was born in an Hasidic Jewish family, that is to say, the most Orthodox among religious Jews. If you've ever been to 47th Street Photo, then you know what a Hasidic Jewish family looks like. He wore a black coat and a yarmulke all the time; he had long sidelocks, and his family observed the letter of the Old Testament, of the Hebrew Bible.

Ahrne was taught to pray many hours during the day, and how frightened he was at any infraction of the Jewish code, the Jewish law, of any violation of Jewish ethics and rules of behavior. And he feared, as he was told by his rabbi, that if he did commit a sin, he would be condemned to ride naked on a porcupine horse, with quills sticking into his little body. This terrified the poor little fellow.

And in fact he wrote a marvellous story about it, which was published in **Midstream** magazine a couple of years ago, which I commend to your attention.

Another incident from his childhood took place when he was seven years old. He told me that he always feared coming late to morning prayer, which started very early in the morning. Abe mentioned that he would call Ahrne up at seven-thirty A.M. and Ahrne never let the phone ring more than once. This must date back to his early childhood. I remember that Ahrne and I were once in Amherst, Massachusetts, visiting the National Yiddish Book Center, giving a talk there. We stayed on the outskirts of the town, at a farmhouse, stayed up, talking to friends, till the late hours of the night. The next morning I got up at 6:30 — there was a long day ahead — and I went quickly down the rickety stairs to find Ahrne and wake him up. But as I got downstairs and began to look around, Ahrne came in the front door, having walked five miles in the middle of the winter, with his beret and his grey coat, smiling that beaming

smile that I already mentioned to you. That was Ahrne. And it reminds me of his experience as a boy of seven. Fearful of coming late to morning prayers, he woke up in the middle of the night, and rushed to the temple, knocked on the door and rang the bell, until finally the custodian came out. He said, "It's three o'clock in the morning. Go home. Go back to your parents and your home." Such were the fears, in this atmosphere of orthodoxy and religious dogma, that Ahrne grew up with.

He was born into a middle-class, a rather prosperous, Polish-Jewish family, in 1904, in the city of Lodz, which was a textile center in Poland. His father owned a dry-goods store. He died when Ahrne was a boy, and Ahrne helped his mother at the store. But, quite soon, Ahrne began to run into instances, personal and observed, of anti-Semitism in Poland, which was rife in those years before the First World War. And he made two vows to himself. Number one was to learn a trade, to work with his hands, and number two was to leave Poland. It was a wise decision because his only sibling, a sister, who was two years

older than Ahrne, perished later in Auschwitz with her two children. And of course, this left indelible marks on Ahrne.

As a young man in his teens, he did abandon his Hasidic background, never to rejoin any religion. He left his native country of Poland, never to return, and made his way, partly on foot, across the European continent, ultimately winding up in Paris. He worked at various jobs as he moved westward across Europe — once, he told me, in a quarry pulling metal carts. After he got to Paris, he became a factory worker and he did factory work for several years. This was during the period of the agitation for Sacco and Vanzetti, during the mid-nineteen-twenties. They were executed, as you remember, in 1927. And it was as a result of this agitation that he became curious about anarchism and began to read anarchist literature. The anarchists were always producing large quantities of literature, and he read it in several languages. Gradually, after thinking about it and thinking about it — he was always suspicious of people who said they were converted overnight to anarchism, or anything

else; he felt that anarchism was a serious philosophy of life and you have to study it and think about it — he eventually became an anarchist.

A few years later, in 1930, Ahrne emigrated from France to Canada, settling in the city of Toronto. Again he became a factory worker and, at the same time, began to write for the **Free Voice of Labor,** the most important Jewish anarchist paper that ever existed. He spent almost fifty years of his life in close alliance with the paper, serving as assistant editor in the 1950s and as full editor in the last three years of its existence.

He also joined an anarchist group in Toronto, called the International Group, which consisted not only of Jewish anarchists, but also of English, Scottish, Bulgarian, Spanish and Italian anarchists, as well as a Dutch couple called the Meilises, exemplifying the internationalism of anarchism. The International Group produced a little newspaper and Ahrne was active in the group.

At the same time, he became active, as I mentioned, in the Jewish side of the movement.

Emma Goldman spent her last years in Toronto during the 1930s — she died there in 1940 — and Ahrne became a friend of hers. He used to tell me stories — I was always asking him, pestering him, to tell me stories about the old days in the movement. I guess it's the historian in me; I'm always interested to hear these stories. And he had many interesting stories about Emma Goldman. Some of you may have read the two biographies, by Candance Falk and Alice Wexler, of Emma Goldman, that came out a year ago or so. Well, both of these women got a lot of material from Ahrne, who had vivid recollections of his personal contact.

I am now thinking of a particular story that Paula may remember. Emma liked Ahrne and wanted to visit his home, he told me. And yet, he was a worker, he hardly had any money, and his wife was working. They had a one-room flat on the third or fourth story — I don't remember which. It was a walk-up, and he was embarassed to invite Emma Goldman to his apartment. So one day she took the bull by the horns and went over there. She

was driven over by Tom Meilis, the Dutch anarchist I mentioned, walked up the steps, and berated Ahrne for not inviting her. She said, "Why are you ashamed? You're a working man. Why should you be ashamed of living in such a neat place?" Knowing Paula, I'm sure the place was very neat, and I bet Emma had a good meal if Paula was cooking.

He also told me that Emma Goldman, then a woman in her sixties, and one of the great orators of the anarchist movement, who always seemed so at ease with herself, was in fact exceedingly nervous before every speech, and had to drink some whisky before mounting the podium.

Another thing Ahrne told me was how he was there when Emma was carried out of the apartment when she suffered a major stroke. She wasn't yet dead, but she would be in a month or two. Ahrne was there and watched the stretcher being carried out to the ambulance, and though she was partly paralyzed, her skirt had rolled up over her knees, and she modestly stretched forward and rolled the skirt down. He was very touched by this

Old World gesture of Emma Goldman which harked back to earlier times, the Victorian Age in which she came to womanhood. Ahrne told me many other stories of this type, some of which I've written down, and others recall from memory.

Well, I'd better cut his short — I'm taking too long, I'll just try to compress it a bit. Ahrne in 1940 emigrated from Canada to the United States. This was at the beginning of the Second World War. What was an anarchist supposed to do? Anarchists are anti-militarists, they're against wars, they're against sending young men — and young women now — to serve as cannon fodder for capitalists and the state. The state is the great butcher, the great bomb thrower, not the anarchists. That was the idea of most anarchists. They were, as I say, anti-militarists, some of them were pacifists. And yet this was one war that Ahrne considered a just war. In fact, he got a job in a uniform factory, here in the United States, to fight against Hitler. And he began to make distinctions among governments. He believed that all governments were essentially evil all

governments were essentially corrupt — had he lived to see what is happening in New York City he would have felt vindicated once again for the umpteenth time — and that all governments were inherently aggressive and machines for making war. That was Ahrne's philosophy. But he began to recognize distinctions: some governments were worse than others; all were bad, but some were worse. And the worst possible government was the government of the Nazis and he felt that it should be opposed by force.

Ahrne was essentially a pacifist, even though he supported this war Some of you may have seen the film **The Free Voice of Labor: the Jewish Anarchists,** made in 1978 or 1979. In fact, the film makers are in this room tonight, practically the whole crew, except the camera-woman, is that correct? You'll recall the scene where Ahrne first appears on the screen, still with his vivid eyebrows, his twinkle and his smile, and his intelligent look. The first words out of his mouth are "I am a man of peace. That's why I am an anarchist."

And he was a man of peace. He was also a

man of reason He always emphasized the construcive side of anarchism. There was an old Russian anarchist named Maximoff — Sam Dolgoff here remembers Maximoff; he was Sam's close friend and mentor in the 1920s, a refugee from the Russian Revolution. Maximoff wrote a pamphlet called **Constructive Anarchism.** And that's the side of anarchism that Ahrne always emphasized. He deplored the bomb throwing and the expropriations and the armed robberies, engaged in by a small fraction of the movement. He always cherished the cooperative side — mutual aid, in Kropotkin's famous phrase, the building of housing cooperatives and clothing and bakery cooperatives, the strengthening of libertarian unions, the founding of anarchist schools. Abe told us how Ahrne felt a personal attachment to the anarchist school in Stelton, New Jersey, although he had never actually taken part in it, living in Europe and in Canada during its active years. It was this side of anarchism — cooperation, mutual assistance — that he always felt was the key to the anarchist message.

Ahrne, as I say, was mainly active in the

Jewish anarchist movement, laboring long years for **Free Voice of Labor.** But he wrote for a wide range of newspapers. He was an ecumenical anarchist, not the kind of anarchist that scorned liberals and socialists. He wrote for **Unser Zeit (Our Time),** the journal of the Jewish Bund, and for literary papers, like **Afn Shvel (On the Threshold).** He also had a radio program on WEVD, in which he spoke about world events. In addition to being the editor of the **Free Voice of Labor,** he served as assistant editor of **Gerechtigkeit (Justice),** the newspaper of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and held a number of other positions of this sort. He wrote for several major English-language magazines, including **Midstream** and **Present Tense.**

One more thing I have to say about Ahrne is I can't remember, over a period of twenty-two or twenty-three years, ever having an argument with him. I don't mean a disagreement, a difference of opinion. We often disagreed and would discuss our differences, but we never had any personal argument, any quarrel. I never became irritated with Ahrne.

I can't think of anybody else in the world, with the exception of Valerio Isca, that I never became irritated with. Don't we all get irritated at one time or another with people? But whenever I saw Ahrne, I was not only happy, but delighted to see him. Whenever the phone rang and Ahrne was on the other end, I never felt impatience or wanted to get back to my work. On the contrary, it was always a special treat for me to be in touch with Ahrne, with his mellow voice and his optimistic view — in contrast to my own jaded, cynical, pessimistic view — of the world. He always made me feel better. Whenever I talked to him about anything, even as I was frowning or lifting a skeptical eyebrow, Ahrne was always smiling and calming me down. And when the conversation had ended, or even as it just began, I felt better about the world, more optimistic, less dejected about what I had read in the morning newspaper or heard on the evening news. Ahrne was my Jewish anarchist therapist, my comforter and friend. He also knew a great deal about many subjects and was helpful to me in every way. So I miss him dearly

and I think he will be missed by everybody who knew him.

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